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ABSTRACT

This digest examines the emerging profession of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to adults who live and work in the United States, offering suggestions for beginning a career in this field and continuing to grow professionally. The fundamental duty of an ESL teacher is to facilitate development of communication skills in English, in either classroom or tutorial setting. In many programs, the ESL teacher must also transmit substantive content beyond language instruction (e.g., job skills, survival skills). Program setting, type, approach, learner group, and scheduling vary widely. ESL teachers often work under challenging conditions, with high turnover and burnout rates. However, many also feel the intrinsic rewards of the work are considerable. Adult ESL teachers come from a wide variety of backgrounds, combining formal and informal training and experience. Prospective ESL teachers should have some experience in second language learning and teaching. The most common options for formal training are the certificate and master's degree, although alternative training structures may be considered. Exploration of career options, through professional association, contact with other ESL teachers, volunteering, reading, Internet exploration, and conference attendance, is recommended. (Contains 15 references.) (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ERIC Digest

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National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

The Adult ESL Teaching Profession

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According to the 1995 National Household Survey, 4 million adults in the United States are studying English as a second language (ESL) or would like to be (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Approximately two thirds of adult education programs currently provide instructional services for non-English speakers (Fitzgerald, 1995).

This digest examines the emerging profession of teaching ESL to adults who live and work in the United States. It offers suggestions both for beginning a career in this field and for continuing to grow as a professional.

What an Adult ESL Teacher Does

The fundamental duty of a teacher of adult ESL is to facilitate the development of communication skills in English, either in a classroom setting or in a one-on-one tutoring structure. In many program settings, teachers must also include substantive content beyond language instruction, such as employment skills, survival skills, cultural information, or American history and citizenship facts. Teachers must also take into consideration the implications of the learners' cultural differences and cultural adjustment processes. Other duties may include any combination of materials development or selection, lesson planning, curriculum development, assessment and evaluation, and even counseling or referrals.

Programs in which adult ESL teachers work vary widely in terms of *setting*: community-based organization site, correctional facility, private educational institution, workplace site, community college; *program type*: academic, nonacademic, prevocational, vocational, workplace, survival ESL, citizenship; *approach*: family literacy, participatory, whole language, tutorial; *learner group*: adults, college students, refugees, out-of-school youth, prisoners, high-level professionals; and *timing*: part-time, day, evening, full-time (Guth, 1993; Wrigley, 1991). Each of these characteristics influences the specific nature of the teacher's work. Positions are also available in administration, research, and in policy and nonprofit organizations that support adult ESL programs (Parsons, 1995).

Challenges and Rewards

Although the work of the adult ESL teacher is varied and rewarding, there are challenges. As Willett and Jeannot (1993, p. 477) indicate, "Teachers in the field of adult ESL literacy work in the margins. They work in left-over spaces, with inappropriate materials, under unpleasant conditions, for little money or professional status, with students who are ignored and excluded by the dominant society." Most teachers are part-time, hourly employees teaching in more than one program. Turnover rates are high, and burn-out is common (Chisman, Wrigley, & Ewen, 1993; Kutner, 1992). Adult ESL professionals often feel that recognition and compensation are less than adequate and that their programs are given a low status relative to other adult education components (Chisman et al, 1993; Pennington, 1992).

So why do people continue to pursue careers in adult ESL? Why are so many willing to meet the job's demands for flexibility, creativity, sensitivity, and commitment? Many ESL teachers identify themselves as intrinsically motivated, focusing on rewards that are less tangible than financial compensation or professional status and recognition: social service, creativity, connectedness to others, and sense of accomplishment (Pennington, 1992). Further, practitioners of adult ESL tend to exhibit the behavior of "culturally relevant teachers" in that they are aware of their own cultural experiences, have a desire to learn from other cultures, and are interested in cross-cultural communication (Ernst, 1993, p. 7). Because of this, they have strong feelings of commitment to and responsibility for the English learners in their classes .

Background and Training

Traditionally, adult ESL teachers come to their jobs from a variety of backgrounds, combining formal and informal training and experiences (Wrigley, 1991). In some states, there is still no requirement beyond a college degree to teach adult ESL. But within the field itself, the need for increased professionalization has prompted a concern for a clear articulation of qualifications that both calls for formal training and acknowledges the value of experience (Crandall, 1993; Crandall, 1994; Wrigley, 1991; Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Prospective ESL teachers should have some knowledge about second language acquisition and teaching (Crandall, 1993; Wrigley & Guth, 1991). Because many teachers come from K-12 or similar settings with limited exposure to adults, it is important as well that they acquire an understanding of how adults learn (Chisman et al, 1993; Pelavin, 1994).

The most common options for formal training are the certificate in TESOL and the Master's degree, although alternative structures are being explored for pre- and in-service education and professional development. These include mentoring, reflective teaching, and applied science models (Crandall, 1994; Terdy, 1993). The certificate in TESOL usually consists of 18-21 graduate credits from a university or teacher-training program. Master's degrees (M.Ed. TESOL, M.A. or M.S. in Linguistics, M.A. in English with emphasis in ESL, M.A.T. with emphasis in TESOL) usually require 30-36 hours of graduate level credits, depending upon thesis and practicum requirements (Parsons, 1995). Typical course topics include principles of linguistics, second language acquisition theory, phonetics, psycholinguistics, and ESL teaching methods. Although not all MA programs offer courses specifically designed for individuals who wish to teach adults, Master's degrees offer the ESL professional—including those who want to work with adults—the most varied employment options.

Practical experience, such as volunteer teaching, tutoring, or working as an aide in an ESL class, is useful. Personal experience in learning another language, adapting to a new culture, or interacting

with adults in an educational context is also helpful, as is familiarity with the lives and concerns of the target learners (Ernst, 1993).

How and Where to Start

Explore your career options. Contact Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL, Inc.). TESOL, Inc. (703-836-0774; http://www.tesol.edu), in Alexandria, VA, is a professional organization for teachers of English to speakers of other languages. It produces publications that examine both the ESL and EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching professions. Some TESOL publications providing references and practical advice to the ESL professional include *More than a Native Speaker* (1996) by Don Snow; *The ELT Guide* (1997); *The ESL/EFL Job Search Handbook* (Parsons, 1995); and *Directory of Professional Preparation Programs in TESOL in the United States and Canada, 1995-97*.

Volunteer as a teacher or tutor in your area and gain first-hand experience which will inform and advance your decisions about a career in the adult ESL teaching field. Contact your local public school; volunteers may be needed for its adult programs. Investigate refugee programs and community-based organizations, as they often rely on volunteers to provide instruction. For general information on opportunities in your area, contact the National Literacy Hotline (800-228-8813), or organizations like Literacy Volunteers of America (315-472-0001; http://archon.educ.kent.edu/LVA/) or Laubach Literacy (800-528-2224; http://www.laubach.org).

Join a professional organization and reap the benefits of affiliation with an extensive support system. TESOL, Inc. and its state and regional affiliates offer professionals in ESL a variety of opportunities for networking and professional development.

Read publications about teaching ESL. As described above, TESOL, Inc. is a comprehensive source of journals, newsletters, and reference books. Other organizations also disseminate free or low-cost materials that inform prospective and current professionals alike. Some of these organizations are the National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, publishers of this digest (NCLE, 202-429-9292; http://www.cal.org/ncle); the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL, 202-632-1500; http://novel.nifl.gov); and the system of State Literacy Resource Centers (SLRCs). Contact NIFL for centers in your area or visit NIFL's SLRC webpage at http://novel.nifl.gov/hubsmap.htm. Finally, publishers such as Addison Wesley Longman (800-266-8855), Cambridge University Press (800-872-7423), Heinle and Heinle (800-237-0053), and New Reader's Press (800-448-8878) are recognized sources of materials on the methodology, theory, and practice of teaching ESL.

Connect to the Internet to see what issues are of current interest in ESL. World Wide Web sites like Dave's ESL Cafe (http://www.pacificnet.net/~sperling/eslcafe.html), Linguistic Funland TESL (http://www.linguistic-funland.com/tesl.html), and Hands-on English (http://www.4w.com/hoe) provide teaching tips, sample activities, job listings, general advice, and links to other relevant sites.

Listservs offer an opportunity, via an e-mail forum, to share information on teaching ESL. Two active listservs addressing issues in adult ESL are NIFL-ESL and TESL-L. To subscribe to NIFL-ESL, send an e-mail message to ncle@cal.org or visit http://novel.nifl.gov/nifl-esl/subscribe-esl.html. To subscribe to TESL-L, send an e-mail message to listserv@cunyvm.cuny.edu with a blank subject line and the message "Subscribe TESL-L yourfirstname yourlastname".

Attend workshops, summer institutes, conferences, or other training events for exposure to the latest theories, methods, techniques, and issues in teaching ESL and for the opportunity to network with experts and practicing professionals. TESOL maintains a list of conferences and professional development activities on its web site (http://www.tesol.edu/isaffil/isaffil.html), as well as information about its own annual conference (http://www.tesol.edu/conv/t98.html).

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